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Chartism and Class Struggle

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Chartism and Class Struggle

Nicholas Rogers

James Epstein and Dorothy Thompson, eds., *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working-Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830-1860* (London: MacMillan 1982).

Dorothy Thompson, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon 1984).

Ivor Wilks, *South Wales and the Rising of 1839* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1984).

David V.J. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985).

CHARTISM WAS A CAMPAIGN for democratic rights which captured the imagination and support of the working class in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Despite the longevity of its political aims, it was its social character that caught the contemporary eye, differentiating it from earlier radical movements. To Marx and Engels, Chartism was the political embodiment of working-class insurgency in the first industrial nation, presaging social revolution. From 1838 onwards universal suffrage lost its idealist character and became, in Marx's own words, "the equivalent for political power for the working class of England, where the proletariat forms the large majority of the population, where, in a long, though underground civil war, it has gained a clear consciousness of its position as a class."[1] It is upon this formulation, as well as the more condescending portraits of Carlyle, Disraeli, and Mrs. Gaskell, that much of the debate about Chartism has turned.

[1] K. Marx and F. Engels, *Articles On Britain* (Moscow 1971), 119.

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Understandably, the tremendous expansion of social history in the past two decades has changed the orientation of Chartist studies. The early scholarly treatment of the movement was emphatically Fabian in perspective and sought to highlight Chartism's more respectable, constitutionalist dimension. Mark Hovell, for example, emphasized the role of the rational, self-educated artisans of the London Working Men's Association who helped frame the charter and who lent considerable weight to the class-collaborationist ventures of the Birmingham Political Union and the Complete Suffrage Movement. In his view it was the reckless leadership of Feargus O'Connor and his "semi-barbaric" followers from the north that wrecked the unity of the movement by alienating potential middle-class support. This became the staple interpretation of Chartism, one that hinged upon a dichotomy between an enlightened London artisan class, proponents of "moral force," and a "physical force" contingent of "fustian jackets and unshorn chins" fuelled by hunger and hardship.[2] It generated sociological clichés about leaders and followers as well as opening the door to a spasmodic, economically reductionist interpretation of Chartism that saw the movement's momentum and intensity rise and fall with the trade cycle.

These caricatures came in for some hard knocks before social history reached its current popularity. The shift to the local context pioneered by *Chartist Studies* in 1959 belied the erratic, episodic view of Chartism and revealed a rich network of community activities sustained by a hitherto invisible voluntary staff of key activists.[3] It also exposed the complexity of class alignments and initiatives, something that was to be taken up and developed by John Foster in his study of Oldham,[4] albeit from a very different political perspective. The recent crop of books, too, have built on this local dimension, although they have not been concerned simply to generate yet another round of local studies. As the introduction to *Chartist Experience* hints, this can degenerate into a local antiquarianism obscuring the diverse but national dimensions of Chartism. Rather, there has been an attempt to recapture the collective experience of Chartism, its culture and ideology, as well as to address problems that arose out of its promotion of a mass platform for democratic change. Of critical importance to these issues has been the work of social historians on popular radicalism and collective protest, especially E.P. Thompson, whose theoretical and methodological formulations on early working-class culture and consciousness continue to inform and engage work on the labour movement.

One of the problems that has always confronted historians of Chartism has been an evaluation of the insurrectionary impulses of 1839. When the "General Convention of the Industrious Classes" first met in February 1839 to organize a monster petition to Parliament, there was a good deal of debate about the "ulterior measures" that might be taken should the charter fail. Much of the language of menace was rhetorical, part of a radical strategy that harked back to the reform agitations of the early 1830s as well as to the Peterloo massacre of 1819. Chartists of all persuasions believed in defiant, constitutional mass action and the right to arm themselves against government repression. But beyond that there was considerable disagreement about the sorts of confrontationalist strategies that might be adopted and how far Chartists should

[2] Mark Hovell, *The Chartist Movement* (Manchester 1925); for a useful summary of early Chartist historiography, see Dorothy Thompson, "Radicals and Their Historians," *Literature and History*, 5 (1977), 104-8.

[3] Asa Briggs, ed., *Chartist Studies* (London 1959).

[4] John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London 1974).

move beyond economic sanctions towards insurrectionary activity. These issues deeply divided the convention and prompted dissension and equivocal recommendations. In the event, the delegates framed a series of ulterior measures but called off the most controversial, a general strike or "sacred month," substituting in its stead a three-day "national holiday." Having moved towards confrontation, the convention, harassed by the arrest of its leaders, drew back, only to witness some militant demonstrations in the north during the three-day strike and months later a massive rising in the valleys of South Wales.

The march on Newport of the colliers and ironworkers of the South Wales coalfield has always been something of a mystery. Carried out in the utmost secrecy, it was a source of considerable contemporary speculation. Some Chartists believed it was the work of *agents provocateurs*. William Cardo, the Marylebone delegate to the Chartist convention, claimed it was part of a projected general rising organized by a small circle of ultras which included the Polish émigré and member of the London Democratic Association, Major Beniowski. Mark Hovell took this quite seriously: in his view, "the Newport Rising was the climax of this secret preparation."[5] But David Williams, the biographer of John Frost, the leader of the rising, was more skeptical. He doubted Frost's revolutionary intentions and he saw the march on Newport as a specifically Welsh affair. He concluded that it was "a great demonstration of strength" to raise Chartist spirits and to pressure the government to release Henry Vincent, the West Country orator who had helped mobilize the coalfields.[6]

The two recent historians of the rising drive a wedge between these interpretations. Like Hovell they do see the march on Newport as insurrectionary; but unlike Hovell they do not see the rising as solely part of a master plan hatched by ultras at the convention. In their view the initiative lay with the ironworking and mining districts, and like Williams, and indeed G.D.H. Cole, they emphasize the Welsh background to the rebellion. Both Jones and Wilks show how the insurrection grew out of the highly polarized climate of the valleys in which a small group of Anglicized coal owners and ironmasters, socially linked to the gentry, presided over a predominantly Welsh-speaking work force in a fast growing boom and bust economy. These first generation proletarians enjoyed relatively high wages, but wages were whittled away by the high cost of provisions, truck, and deductions for rent and tools. Industrial relations were also soured by the masters' indifference to accidents and familial welfare. Strikes were frequent in this raw, frontier society. In 1816, 1822, 1830, and 1832 the mining of the whole South Wales coalfield came to a halt, troops were brought in, and the leaders of the miners were imprisoned. Efforts to unionize were crushed by employers, giving rise in the Monmouthshire coalfields to the Scotch Cattle movement. The Cattle were community-based secret organizations which resisted wage reductions, back pay, truck by intimidation, and industrial sabotage. Outside the iron district of Merthyr Tydfil, itself the scene of open rebellion in 1831 when crowds wrecked the local Court of Requests and repossessed impounded property, "Scotch law" was a major force in the South Wales coalfield up to and beyond the Newport rising.

The Cattle are crucial to the new interpretation of the Newport insurrection because they help to explain how the march of 4 November, involving some 5,000 ironworkers and colliers from over 30 different communities, could be organized so efficiently and so secretly. Not that this was the only network upon which radicals could draw. In an area that

[5] Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, 175.

[6] David Williams, *John Frost: A Study In Chartism* (London 1939), 189-93, 287-9.

was both religiously and linguistically divided, pubs, beerhouses, the workplace, and to a lesser extent, chapels, formed critical loci of dissent, and one is struck by the rapidity with which Chartism grew in the coalfield. Paradoxically this was not the Chartists' original recruiting ground in South Wales. People like Frost, a draper embroiled in the freemen politics of Newport, predictably pitched their initial appeal to the trades workers and artisans of the more established centres: Carmarthen, Llanelly, Welshpool, Newtown, Llanidloes. These were the natural seedbeds for radicalism under the auspices of the London Working Men's Association. But Vincent's excursions into the industrial heartland, backed by Welsh-speaking lieutenants, proved strikingly successful. The valleys rallied to the radicals, seeing political power as a means of industrial action against the local "aristocracy" of iron and coal. By 1839 there were at least 50 lodges in the coalfield and over 25,000 committed Chartists. It was this upsurge of activity, sharpened by the rhetoric of ulterior measures and a sense of imminent class confrontation, that prompted the South Wales bourgeoisie to mount a counteroffensive, cracking down on popular meetings, recruiting specials, requesting troops, and arresting Vincent and other Chartist leaders for their inflammatory speeches.

Class tensions in the South Wales coalfield were at fever pitch before the National Petition was presented to Parliament; and as the convention struggled to find a strategy that would sustain the unity of the movement and popular pressure upon the state, South Wales was moving in an insurrectionary direction. Both Wilks and Jones stress the popular insurgency of the valleys and the inability of John Frost to contain it. All that Frost could do was to try to coordinate the imminent revolt in South Wales with similar projects in England, or at least with those aired by "Jacobin" Chartists in the final days of the convention. It was a gamble that failed. It proved impossible to harness the militant energy of 1839 to some larger, national plan. What is more, the march on Newport denied ultras the symbolic victory for which they had hoped. Their leaders were ill-prepared for the bloody confrontation that accompanied the attempt to rescue Chartists from the Westgate Hotel and their indecision at this critical juncture proved fatal. As a result the Newport rising was a fiasco, frustrating the more vaguely-formed plans set afoot in Newcastle and the West Riding.

Even so, the Newport rising provides plenty of evidence of grassroots insurrectionary feeling. As Ivor Wilks emphasizes, some colliers and ironworkers saw the rising as the dawn of a new age. Highlighting the testimony of Zephaniah Williams, the radical publican from Blaina, he argues that the march on Newport was the first step towards the creation of a workers' republic in South Wales, to be followed by the capture of other towns along the River Usk and the Severn estuary. How general a project this was remains a matter of some dispute. David Jones is a good deal more circumspect about this evidence, stressing the diversity of plans and the divergence between intentions and execution. Underscoring Frost's late resumption of leadership, he is more inclined to see the rising as part of a larger British plan, the launching pad for the popular rebellion. At the same time, Jones, like Wilks, emphasizes the crucial importance of local factors. The Newport rising belonged to a tradition of regional revolt in South Wales and to a "culture of alienation, sedition and violent protest" (207) that grew out of this religious and linguistically divided industrial society. Workers demanded an end to political oppression, to the concentration of political and economic power which denied them bargaining rights in the coalfield. In concrete terms this meant some control over the workplace as well as better conditions. Whether workers aspired to take

over the means of production remains a moot point. Jones denies it, but Wilks does believe such a demand was seriously contemplated, citing a resolution of the Garndiffaith lodge that "the Works do not belong to the present proprietors, but to the Workmen, and that they would very shortly have them." (Jones 208; Wilks 115)

These differences aside, both Jones and Wilks see the Newport rising as generated from below, and only loosely connected to the insurrectionary plans of the ultras of the convention. Their books illustrate clearly the centrifugal character of early Chartism and the extreme difficulty that its leaders faced in bringing unity to this fledgling political movement in its first confrontationalist phase. Bedeviled by internal differences and by a government that never lost its nerve, the momentum of the mass platform was lost. The three-day strike was enforced only in the north and west[7] and only in Wales did the secret arming of 1839 actually lead to an insurrection. The physical-force variety of Chartism failed to force concessions from above through defiant, constitutional agitation; nor was it able to provoke the government into extreme forms of counterinsurgency. In retreat, it also failed to prevent the South Wales valleys from pursuing their own war with the ironmasters.

The failure of 1839 led Chartists to regroup, and it is this rebuilding of the movement that forms one of the salient themes of the two other books under review. This is especially the case with Dorothy Thompson's long-awaited authoritative study. While the major moments of mass agitation are by no means neglected, the principal emphasis is upon the voluntary staff of the movement, the committed workers who gave Chartism the staying power that distinguished it from earlier radical campaigns. The central chapters of the book are devoted to who the Chartists were and to the organizations they created and it is here that her immense scholarship shines through. Rejecting the transitionalist interpretation of Neil Smelser and others who saw Chartism as principally a movement of declining outworkers displaced by industrialization, Thompson shows that Chartism appealed to both artisans and factory operatives as well as a smattering of small traders, professionals, and even rural crafts workers and labourers. Nor was it exclusively male. As a community-based movement, women were active in early Chartist political societies and demonstrations, although not as feminists. Women were more preoccupied with the Poor Law and the low level of wages than with female suffrage. Those that were married, writes Thompson, "did not see their interests as being in opposition to those of their husbands — or if they did, they did not see any solution to such conflict in political action." (126)

As for the local leaders themselves, Dorothy Thompson is able to show that they came from many walks of working-class life and were not confined to the artisan "élite" as is conventionally believed. Nor were they necessarily small business-owners or shopkeepers. Indeed, through her command of local sources she is able to show the varied trajectory of their lives and the fine line that separated the small self-employed trader from the wage-earner. Booksellers, publicans, and shopkeepers may have regularly assumed office in local associations, but this was only because of the economic constraints and potential victimization by employers which prevented workers from assuming a more active role. Even so, Chartist lecturers and officers of the National Charter Association often began life as wage-earners, in the north as textile workers in particular, and they, like the small traders, remained loyal to their working-class roots.

[7] Robert Sykes, "Physical-Force Chartism: The Cotton District and the Chartist Crisis of 1839," *International Review of Social History*, 30 (1985), 207-36.

The picture that is presented is of a democratic, participatory working-class movement whose heartland was the manufacturing communities of the north. Indeed, Chartism is seen as qualitatively different from the the other single-issue campaigns of the post-Reform era, embodying in political terms "the total experience of the working people of Britain." (1) Correspondingly, Thompson and some of her fellow contributors to *Chartist Experience* reject attempts to compartmentalize working-class history in ways that would diminish the Chartist achievement. Robert Sykes, for example, shows that Chartism had strong ties with the fledgling union movement, especially among the skilled trades threatened by industrialization. This was as true of the north as it was of London and is nowhere better illustrated than in the so-called Plug Plot Riots of 1842, when half a million workers struck for between three to five weeks in support of the Charter, categorically linking political rights with a protest against wage reductions. Similarly the Irish presence proved no impediment to Chartist unity. Despite the well known rivalry between Daniel O'Connell and Feargus O'Connor, Chartism drew constructively on the Irish revolutionary tradition and at critical junctures became allied with specifically Irish demands, the repeal of the Irish Coercion Act and union with Britain. To be sure, the recruitment of cheap Irish labour into English factories placed strains upon Anglo-Irish amity, but it was offset by the identification of settled Irish communities with the labour movement. Ethnic differences were never so divisive as to override class loyalties.

The new history of Chartism suggests that the movement surmounted sectionalism. It also argues that the well-publicized quarrels of its leaders have been exaggerated, especially when one considers the institutional growth and resilience of Chartism after the dramatic but acrimonious debates of 1839. Within this context O'Connor is rescued from Fabian condemnation as the reckless demagogue of the north and is situated within the mainstream of Chartism. Not that O'Connor's financial independence, energy, and charisma made him a dictatorial leader. Dorothy Thompson, like Epstein,* insists that he owed his leadership to popular consent. Notwithstanding his gentlemanly style of leadership, reminiscent of Henry Hunt, he did assert the need for permanent, independent organizations in the pursuit of working-class political power. Consequently he allowed the *Northern Star* to become the real mouthpiece of the movement and a vital communicative medium at a time when it was illegal for political societies to correspond with one another under the Seditious Meetings Act of 1817. Certainly there was always a tension between his personalized style of leadership and the grassroots quest for a delegated democracy, although it was never a debilitating one.

But Dorothy Thompson is not simply interested in reassessing the quality of Chartist leadership, nor in mapping the scale and geographical range of Chartist activity (over 900 localities are cited in her appendix). Like James Epstein, Eileen Yeo, and others, she is centrally concerned to show how Chartism developed an alternative culture. Modelled on Methodist organizational structures, with class meetings and itinerant lecturers, members of the National Charter Association, the backbone of the movement during the 1840s, sought as much democracy as was compatible with the law. Chartist churches and mutual associations became critical sites of working-class self-sufficiency and cooperation. James Epstein shows how Nottingham's Democratic Chapel provided a wide range of social activities for the 20 to 30 Chartist associations in the area: a day and Sunday school where children were taught about the

* James Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London 1982).

expropriators of the people's rights and liberties; a teetotal society; a glee club; a reading room and library; and Sunday services emphasizing the equality of all believers. Chartist democracy, it is stressed, was counter-hegemonic in style and practice, expressing a quest for working-class self-provision, a labour theory of value that challenged liberal orthodoxies, and the right to full political citizenship (for men) and access to free, universal education. In Thompson and Yeo, in particular, the struggle for a genuinely democratic practice embodying social values antithetical to industrial capitalism, was as important as the six points of the charter. It was this vision of collective control that died with Chartism. Chartist democracy was subversive. It would have transformed the institutions of the state and certainly altered the trajectory of industrial capitalism. Chartist democracy bore no relation to its twentieth-century namesake which served principally to protect existing working-class institutions within a more corporatist framework. "There is in fact a strong case for saying," Dorothy Thompson concludes, "that for all their poverty and long hours of work, the men and women of the early industrial districts which produced Chartism had more say in many important aspects of their lives than their more prosperous descendants." (336)

We have, then, a new countercultural interpretation of Chartism, one that deliberately eschews a Whiggish reading of its contribution to democracy and rejects the conventional interpretation of the movement as volatile, erratic, and fuelled by hunger and hardship. This has brought substantial gains, assigning popular agency a critical role in the making of the movement and affording a more balanced treatment of its political leadership. At the same time it has served to make some of the twists and turns in Chartist strategy more explicable and has helped to situate its more regenerative experiments within the mainstream. The Chartist Land Plan, for example, can no longer be seen as a personal quirk of O'Connor or as a socially regressive retreat from political radicalism, but as an integral part of the Chartist programme, providing a viable alternative and partial solution to urban over-competition and unemployment, one within the mainstream of radical land policy since Paine and Cobbett.

At the same time the emphasis upon Chartism's alternative culture does harbour some nagging problems. Even in Nottingham, the only town to elect a Chartist to Parliament, the cultural organizations of the movement were quite short-lived, declining after 1845. Similarly in Halifax, where Chartism survived into the 1850s, a strong community-based movement entered a tactical alliance with middle-class radicalism which inevitably compromised the integrity of its own cells of opposition. If this is the record of two major Chartist strongholds, what happened elsewhere? To what extent was Chartism able to build a strong opposition culture, and what relationship did this local quest for self-sufficiency have to Chartism's formal political programme? It seems paradoxical that the very decade of Chartism's cultural growth should also have been the decade of its decline as a national movement.

These issues are addressed in part by John Belchem, who clearly believes that too much emphasis upon the counterculture of Chartist branch life may detract from the central importance of the mass platform. Chartism was, after all, a movement aiming to mobilize the masses against the state and in his view the collapse of the mass platform in 1848 left it highly susceptible to liberal penetration and compromise. The insistence that Chartism was quintessentially a radical movement whose genealogy stretched back to the anti-court agitations of the eighteenth century is also made by Gareth Stedman Jones. Drawing upon recent developments in structuralist linguistics, he insists that Chartism must be discur-

sively constructed by means of a non-referential analysis of its public language. *It is misleading, he contends, to decode* Chartism as a class movement by assuming a relatively direct relationship between social being and social consciousness, *mediated by experience. This neglects the* way in which language itself orders and refracts experience. Once this is recognized, Stedman Jones continues, a new interpretation of Chartism emerges. Rather than seeing Chartism as an expression of working-class consciousness, Chartism should be cast as a radical movement which juxtaposed the "people," the "productive classes," against the privileged minority monopolizing political power. As such it did not offer a class critique of early industrial capitalism. State oppression, not employer exploitation, was the source of injustice and the nodal point of Chartism's analysis. Once the state began to distance itself from the constellation of forces privileged by the Reform Bill of 1832, which was aimed at *stabilizing capitalism and immobilizing* discontent by judicious concessions of social reform, Chartism's credibility crumbled. Its decline may be dated from *the early 1840s, claims Stedman Jones,* not from 1848 and its aftermath, and was attributable to the inapposite character of its political language.

Thus Stedman Jones not only rejects the Thompsonian definition of Chartism, he calls into question a whole generation of scholarship which has sought to examine early popular movements in terms of class struggle. For class itself, Stedman Jones argues, is a discursive practice, having no ontological reality outside its articulation in discourse.[9] Historians who think otherwise have often been misled into making easy derivations of political from social forces, a reductionist fallacy that began with Marx and Engels' definition of Chartism as the politics of the first *proletariat.*

One may begin to probe this interpretation by asking whether language can be so categorically distanced from social referents as Stedman Jones conceives. One may readily acknowledge that formal language structures have a low coefficient of historical mobility, responding slowly to changes in economic and political structures. One may also agree that language does not reflect experience in an unproblematic way. But one might legitimately claim that if language mediates experience, the forms it takes are conditioned by social practice. Linguists recognize this in the distinction between the denotative and the connotative, between the formal and associative meaning of words. Indeed even some structuralists now hesitate to define discourses in terms of closed systems of fixed meanings.[10]

Stedman Jones appears to allow for this in his discussion of the changing *meaning of the "people" in radical* discourse and in the way the new entrepreneurial class was located within the ambit of privilege as "millocrat," "cotton lord," and "steam aristocracy." Yet he will not allow this to undermine his insistence upon the non-referential character of language, insisting that struggles over meaning only become critical when they cumulatively displace the prevailing discourse itself.

In fact the changing inflections of radical discourse could be marshalled to illustrate the magnetic force of class in the transformation of popular democratic ideology. This is how Edward Thompson handled the problem of language in *The Making of the English Working Class,* showing how John Gast reevaluated Paine radicalism and conventional political economy in the labour struggles of the

[9] For a more explicit statement of the theoretical presuppositions of the essay, see the extended version and introduction in Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge 1983).

[10] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London 1985), 111-4.

1820s.[11] Such an analysis could be extended into the Chartist era, for while some Chartists continued to view capitalism as a system of unequal exchange, one uncovers, at the height of the general strike of 1842, rather different critiques of industrial capitalism, with strategies for combating over-production, excessive competition, and the unregulated extension of machinery. In the cotton districts, as Robert Sykes and Mick Jenkins have shown,[12] political democracy was linked to a more forthright condemnation of employer exploitation.

Stedman Jones is thus inattentive to the plural voices of Chartism and tends to underplay, in the 1842 crisis, the interdependence of political and economic demands. He also ignores the polysemic character of Chartist language. In an era in which political and economic power were closely intermeshed, in which factory owners presided as magistrates and Poor Law guardians and controlled local police forces, the critique of political privilege could quite easily generate richer, more associative meanings. The point is nowhere clearer than in the South Wales coalfield, where democratic rhetoric was translated, through a chain of equivalences in a deeply divided society, to a total rejection of industrial capitalism. The Newport rising may have been quasi-millennial, but it did call into question the whole system of productive relations which had mushroomed in the coalfield. It was a primitive, impassioned revolt that cannot easily be accommodated with Stedman Jones' theoretical perspective.

Even so, Stedman Jones' essay is a stimulating, provocative intervention. It has highlighted the weaknesses of the orthodox economic interpretation of Chartism's decline, calling for a reevaluation of its political premises, specifically its notion of the state as a naked instrument of class oppression, a perception that addressed the Whigs' initial assault on working-class interests but foundered under more liberal regimes. At a more general level it has forced historians to reconsider the relationship between language, politics, and class. Does politics produce consciousness or consciousness politics? Or less categorically, for neither Stedman Jones nor the Thompsonians ascribe to an economically reductionist notion of class, what weight should be assigned to the political realm in the formation of class interests and identities? The question is likely to engage social historians for some years to come. It also has a political agenda, for in Britain at least, those who argue for a non-referential definition of language also call into question the belief that a left-wing politics must be built within the existing labour movement. Was the "Forward March of Labour" always an article of faith?

[11] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963), chap. 16; see also Iorwerth Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Folkstone, Kent 1979).

[12] Mick Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London 1980), chaps. 6 and 7.